

# 23 AN AMERICAN EMPIRE

## CHAPTER ORGANIZER

This chapter focuses on:

- the circumstances that led to America's "new imperialism."
- the causes of the Spanish-American War.
- Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy in Asia and Latin America.

Throughout most of the late nineteenth century, Americans displayed what one senator called "only a languid interest" in foreign affairs. With the major diplomatic issues stemming from the Civil War having been quickly settled, an isolationist mood swept across the United States, which continued to enjoy what one historian has called "free security": wide oceans as buffers on either side, the British navy situated between America and the powers of Europe, and militarily weak neighbors in the Western Hemisphere.

Yet the notion of America having a "Manifest Destiny" ordained by God to expand its territory and influence remained alive in the decades after the end of the Civil War. Several prominent political and business leaders argued that the rapid industrial development of the United States meant that the nation needed to acquire foreign territories to gain easier access to vital raw materials. In addition, as their exports grew, American companies and farmers would become increasingly in-

tertwined in the world economy. This, in turn, would require an expanded American naval presence to protect the shipping lanes. And a modern steam-powered navy needed bases to replenish the coal and water required for its ships. For these reasons and others, the United States during the last quarter of the nineteenth century began to expand its presence beyond the Western Hemisphere.

## TOWARD THE NEW IMPERIALISM

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, European powers unleashed a new surge of imperialism in Africa and Asia, where they seized colonies, protectorates, and economic privileges. All of Africa except Liberia and Ethiopia fell under outside dominion. Above all, the new imperialism was economic, a quest for markets and raw materials.

Most Americans were concerned about world markets as developments in transportation and communication quickened the pace of commerce and diplomacy. From the first, exports of farm products had been the basis of American economic growth. Now the conviction grew that American manufacturers had matured to the point where they could outsell foreign goods in the world market. But should the expansion of markets lead to territorial expansion as well? Or to intervention in the internal affairs of other countries? On this point Americans disagreed, but a small, yet vocal group of public officials advocated overseas possessions, regardless of the implications. They included Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, Theodore Roosevelt, and not least of all, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan.

**NAVAL POWER** During the 1880s, Captain Mahan became the leading proponent of sea power. A graduate of the Naval Academy, he served for years as president of the Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island. A series of his lectures on naval history grew into a volume published in 1890, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, in which he argued that national greatness and prosperity flowed from sea power, which had a fundamentally economic importance. To Mahan, modern economic development called for a powerful navy, a strong merchant marine, foreign commerce, colonies, and naval bases. The age of steam made a network of coaling stations a new matter.

gic concern. Mahan expounded on his version of America's destiny—to control the Caribbean, build an isthmian canal, and spread Western civilization in the Pacific. He publicized his ideas in popular journals and began to shape public opinion.

Even before Mahan's writings became influential a gradual expansion of the navy had begun. In 1880 the nation had fewer than a hundred seagoing vessels, many of them rusting or rotting at the docks. By the time Cleveland entered office, four new steel vessels had been authorized, and Cleveland's navy secretary got funds for twenty more.

**IMPERIALIST THEORY** Certain intellectual currents of the day worked to bolster the new spirit of Manifest Destiny. The Darwinian idea of natural selection afforded a handy argument for imperialism. If natural selection worked in the biological realm, would it not apply also in human society? Among nations, as among individuals, the fittest survive and prevail. "There is apparently much truth in the belief that the wonderful progress of the United States, as well as the character of the people, are the results of natural selection," Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man* (1871).

John Fiske, the historian and popular lecturer on Darwinism, developed racial corollaries from Darwin's idea. In *American Political Ideas* (1885), he stressed the superior character of "Anglo-Saxon" institutions and peoples. The English "race," he argued, was destined to dominate the globe in the institutions, traditions, language, even in the blood of the world's peoples. Josiah Strong, a Congregational minister, added the sanction of religion to theories of racial superiority. In his book *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885), Strong argued that "Anglo-Saxons" embodied two great ideas: civil liberty and "a pure spiritual Christianity." The Anglo-Saxon was "divinely commissioned to be, in a peculiar sense, his brother's keeper."

## Building an American Empire

Directions: Please answer the following questions in complete sentences after reading the attaching packet. Then read the poem, *The White Man's Burden*, by Rudyard Kipling and answer the questions that follow.

1. Why didn't the United States take a strong interest in foreign affairs during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century?

2. Provide a definition of *Manifest Destiny* and address how you think it shaped the United States throughout the middle-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. How did it influence the country moving into the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

3. What did the United States need to do in order to engage in international affairs (trading & colonization)?

4. What did the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century look like for European countries? What were they engaged in?

5. According to Captain Mahan, what was essential for modern economic development?

6. How did Social Darwinism become a justification/explanation for imperialism?

**"The White Man's Burden": Kipling's Hymn to U.S. Imperialism**

In February 1899, British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled "The White Man's Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands." In this poem, Kipling urged the U.S. to take up the "burden" of empire, as had Britain and other European nations.

Take up the White Man's burden—  
Send forth the best ye breed—  
Go send your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need  
To wait in heavy harness  
On fluttered folk and wild—  
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
Half devil and half child  
Take up the White Man's burden  
In patience to abide

To veil the threat of terror  
And check the show of pride;  
By open speech and simple  
An hundred times made plain  
To seek another's profit  
And work another's gain  
Take up the White Man's burden—  
And reap his old reward:  
The blame of those ye better

The hate of those ye guard—  
The cry of hosts ye humour  
(Ah slowly) to the light:  
"Why brought ye us from bondage,  
"Our loved Egyptian night?"  
Take up the White Man's burden—  
Have done with childish days—  
The lightly proffered laurel,  
The easy, ungrudged praise.  
Comes now, to search your manhood  
Through all the thankless years,  
Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,  
The judgment of your peers!

Source: Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899."  
Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1929).

#### QUESTION TO ANSWER

How does Kipling use the ideas of Social Darwinism in his poem to encourage the colonization of the Philippines? Pick out at least 3 specific passages from the poem to support your claims.

